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Testimony on the “*Apportionment in the Balance: A Look into the Progress of the 2010 Decennial Census.*”

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Mr. Chairman, and Members of the Subcommittee, good morning. Thank you for inviting me to testify at the hearing on the “*Apportionment in the Balance: A Look into the Progress of the 2010 Decennial Census*.” I am a Professor of History and Urban Studies at the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee and specialize in the history of census taking and the development of the United States federal statistical system. I have published several books and numerous articles on statistical policy and census taking. Most recently I coauthored with Stephen E. Fienberg, *Who Counts? The Politics of Census Taking in Contemporary America* and edited *The Encyclopedia of the U.S. Census*. I was a member of the National Academy Panel on Census Requirements for the Year 2000 and Beyond, and have been a fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.

I would like to offer some remarks on the ongoing planning for the 2010 Census in light of the preparations currently underway, the methodological and policy concerns facing the census, and the challenges the Census Bureau faces as 2010 nears.

As is quite clear from its busy agenda, the Census Bureau never really stops “taking a census.” Rather the work of census taking is highly cyclical, marked by the rhythms of the work involved in taking both the last count and the next count. Planning is always looking forward toward innovation and anticipated needs, and back toward the experience of the previous count (and often earlier censuses). We are currently in the middle years of that cycle. The 2000 count is by and large complete, its evaluations done, its data available for public use. The 2010 count is in development. Much of the framework for making many of the decisions about its final shape has been developed.

But much is still undetermined.

Relatedly, the world in which the census is taken each decade also changes. Most notably, of course, the population grows. That was obvious in the eighteenth century, and is why the framers had the foresight to institutionalize the decennial population count in the 1789 Constitution. But even the framers were surprised when they began taking the census. The framers learned in the early years of census taking that the American population did not grow uniformly. Some states grew faster than others; some demographic groups grew faster than others. Congress anticipated that they would have to enlarge the size of the House of Representatives to admit new states to the union and to add representatives as existing states grew in population. But Congress also learned that differential population growth meant reducing the influence of slower growing states or regions in the House, sometimes by actually taking away representatives from a state. This is, as we all know, a painful and politically charged process.

In this context, the Census Bureau has always faced a profound Catch 22 as it organizes and plans for the next count. Until the count is complete, the true dimensions of the demographic change of the previous decade are unclear. The census results are major news each decade, and once the numbers begin to emerge, demographers, political leaders, the media, and ordinary Americans engage in a noisy and complex debate about their meaning and what they imply for social policy, political power, and economic growth. We are still almost always surprised.

The Catch 22 is that, in order to count well, the bureau must anticipate much of the likely demographic change it will identify when it takes the count. It must count accurately and fairly so that all parties will accept the results for apportionment,

redistricting, and as the foundation of our myriad social policies at the national, state and local levels. This is a very tall order.

It is in this context, I would suggest, that we must evaluate the major innovations for 2010, and their progress thus far. Do we have a consensus that the 2010 count will be accurate, efficient and useful? The innovations include:

(1) evaluating the impact of the implementation of the American Community Survey on the 2010 count;

(2) gauging how the improvement of the MAF/TIGER system and related issues in address development will affect address files;

(3) assessing the technological improvements for managing collection and processing of data in 2010.

There are also issues of accuracy and quality for 2010 that were identified as problems of counting in 2000. These include particularly:

(1) ensuring that people are not omitted from the count;

(2) ensuring that people are not counted more than once (one of the Census 2000 “surprises”);

(3) ensuring that the population in non standard residential situations are counted effectively and accurately.

In addition to these concerns, there are contextual factors for all federal government activities that will impact on the 2010 Census. Most obviously, the budgetary environment for the 2010 Census is not a happy one. To this outsider, it appears that the bureau faces curtailing some long standing work, for example, for SIPP,

in order to continue its work in other areas, for example, to continue the development of the ACS. Even more difficult questions can be raised about the possible impact of the war on terror for the 2010 count. The United States has not taken a census when the homeland was under threat, so we have little experience as a nation anticipating if the war might affect the 2010 count.

These considerations suggest additional points about the progress toward 2010.

Address List Development

A successful census is absolutely dependent on the accuracy and quality of the address lists, and for the past 20 years, the bureau has put immense effort in developing the MAF/TIGER system, first as a stand alone, once a decade operation, now as a continuous system. Nevertheless, as the 2000 experience indicated, the lists were uneven, and local government participation in the LUCA program was uneven. Thus the quality of the lists varied in different parts of the country, and the count suffered accordingly. Any improvements to both the system, and to the LUCA program designed to maintain the system, must resolve the barriers to local government involvement.

American Community Survey

The ACS is supposed to help improve the 2010 count by making obsolete the older and very burdensome way of acquiring detailed, local area, “characteristic” information on the American population. That is, the ACS is supposed to take a major burden off the decennial population count and permit a “short form” census. To do so, the ACS funding has to be maintained, and the public and data users must see the ACS as

a successful addition to the national data infrastructure. Now that the ACS is actually in national implementation, and its data are slated to roll out routinely in the future, the success of the ACS, “off stage” if you will, can do much to ease the progress for the 2010 count. Conversely, bumps in the road for ACS, in its administration, its funding, or in its reception and use, will put strain on the 2010 count, and open up a divisive debate about the propriety of dispensing with the long form. The best way to avoid such a debate is to keep the ACS on track, for the bureau to be attuned to, and ready to address, problems with the ACS.

Technology

The Census Bureau pioneered in modern survey administration, from its implementation of punch card technology in 1890, to its introduction of computer technology in 1950, to more recent innovations like FOSDIC and MAF/TIGER. None of these new technologies were without problems, some anticipated, some not. Once again, the bureau is proposing to leap into uncharted territory, and once again, careful evaluation and monitoring are absolutely necessary to insure both improvement and efficiency. As with the introduction of past technologies, there are risks, particularly when compared with slower, perhaps less efficient, but more familiar, technologies.

Accuracy: Overcounts, Undercounts, Miscounts

The key challenge for the success of the census is an accurate count. All the methodology, the statistical science, and the funding is aimed at a goal of an accurate and

fair count. An accurate and fair count is also the standard of quality most understood by the general public. I would suggest that the hot button controversies of the past few censuses will likely reemerge in 2010. Their intensity will depend on whether the public is convinced that the census is accurate and fair. The technological innovations and administrative efforts must be shown to improve accuracy and fairness. The historical record indicates that the Census Bureau loses control of its planning processes when stakeholders, be they members of Congress, state and local governments, or advocates for particular demographic groups, force change in the plan for or implementation of the census, through legislation, court action, or challenges to participation. The process of building trust in the operational plan for the upcoming count is a messy, but absolutely necessary process for ensuring a successful operational plan and census.

Counting Challenges Already on the Horizon:

1. Duplicates in the population count: Can the bureau provide specific information on how the new technologies and the MAF/TIGER updates will reduce duplicate enumerations that faced Census 2000?
2. Omissions in the population count: Can the bureau provide specific information on how the new technologies and the MAF/TIGER updates will prevent the omission of households and individuals?
3. Group quarters: Can the bureau provide specific information on how the new technologies and the MAF/TIGER updates will better count group quarters and reduce errors from geocoding in group quarters.
4. Measurement of Race and Ethnicity. What changes are likely to questions

measuring race and ethnicity? It is my understanding that the bureau is experimenting with including “ancestry,” previously an item on the long form, on the short form. Will any changes from current practice impact the quality of the 2010 count?

5. Counting people with ambiguous residency status. Given the way Americans live, the notion of defining a single, fixed residence for each individual may strike you as a fool’s errand. Nevertheless, the constitutional requirements of the census necessitate deciding where each individual “belongs.” Some population groups are already identified as posing questions for 2010. How will the bureau address concerns about counting prisoners, college students, overseas Americans? How will the bureau build a consensus so that the solutions to the issues of residence are perceived by stakeholders as fair and reasonable.

Counting Challenges from Larger Societal Issues:

Will the bureau be able to acquire the necessary funding to conduct a 2010 census that will serve the nation for the following decade? Will the bureau face the choice between making draconian cuts in its other survey, statistical research, and service programs to fund 2010?

How will issues on the public agenda from the war on terror affect the 2010 Census? In 1970, the counting of overseas military personnel became an issue for the census. If past questionnaires are the guide, the current short form questionnaire will not have questions related to citizenship status or alien status of the population. Will there be interest in such questions for 2010?

Meeting Challenges:

In many ways, the Census Bureau is naturally positioned to meet the challenges of 2010. For example, we know that the bureau is currently testing procedures in Travis County, Texas and at the Cheyenne River Reservation in South Dakota. They are testing question design for race, ethnicity and ancestry for the 2010 count. The 2008 Dress Rehearsal will ideally integrate all the 2010 innovations into a full scale trial run for 2010. In other words, the Census Bureau has not only pioneered in systematic planning of the next count using the best practices available at the time, but also in building testing and evaluation into the planning and implementation processes of the census. The Census Bureau itself developed the methodologies for identifying and measuring the differential undercount, through the innovations of demographic analysis, the post enumeration survey, and dual systems estimation. These evaluation mechanisms should again be deployed for the evaluation of the 2010 count.

On the immediate agenda, evaluation processes must be deployed to insure that the operational innovations currently in development function properly, are cost effective, and are properly administered. But there is another element to such testing and evaluation. Particularly now, when the planning is focused on the operational phases of census taking, we must also remember to set a standard and evaluation procedure to ensure an accurate and fair population count.

That standard always remains an open question for the census. Stakeholders will continue to question how the operational plan provides for the most accurate and fair count possible, and will press to make sure there are procedures to measure the quality of

the coverage integrated into the plan.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for the opportunity to testify on these important issues.
I would be happy to respond to questions you or members of the subcommittee may have.